

By Randolph H. Wind
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Decision on permit is near, Corps officials say

Consultants representing the Grady County Commission on its permit application to build a lake on Tired Creek met with federal officials here Friday to hash out concerns raised in the eleventh hour by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials.

County officials have been told that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were wrapping up their review of the permit application and preparing to issue a decision when EPA officials took issue with possible water quality issues, mitigation concerns and the need for the project.

In a letter to the Corps dated April 20, the EPA recommended the permit for the proposed lake project be denied. Grady County responded to the EPA in an April 29 letter stating the county had satisfied all established standards and requested a favorable permit decision from the Corps.

To further address EPA's concerns, a meeting between the county and EPA was set and was held last week. The EPA also invited officials from the Florida Fish & Wildlife and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

U.S. Representative Sanford Bishop traveled to Cairo to sit in on the meeting along with Jamey Crozier and Wallace Sholar, both members of Bishop's staff. Senator Johnny Isakson also dispatched Frank Redmond of his staff to attend the meeting as his representative.

Representing Grady County was Commission Chairman Al Ball and consultants Laura Benz of Wm. Thomas Craig's office, as well as Eco-South officials Kent Campbell, Alton Owens, and Rick Larsen. Todd Rasmussen, a professor of Hydrology & Water Resources at the University of Georgia, who has acted as a consultant for the county on the Tired Creek project, also

attended.

EPA officials in attendance included Tom Welborn, Jim Giattina and Jennifer Derby. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel here were Richard Morgan, Russ Kaiser and Terry Kobs. Georgia EPD officials present included Cliff Lewis and Keith Parsons. Ted Hoehn of Florida Fish & Wildlife and Chris Stahl of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection were also on hand.

Commission Chairman Ball briefed the members of the county commission Tuesday on the Friday session. Ball said that Congressman Bishop and the representative from Senator Isakson's office pressed for a final decision on the county's permit application.

"Congressman Bishop gave particularly strong remarks and pressed for an answer. He also commented that the project had been 'studied to death'," Ball said.

Following the meeting, Congressman Bishop issued this statement, "The federal government has been working on this project since the 1930s, initially proposing to use the property to develop a lake and a park," said Bishop. "Grady County is now trying to get a permit to develop the lake and I just want the issue resolved in a way that is most beneficial to the people in the Grady County area."

Ball also told commissioners Tuesday that Jamey Crozier of Bishop's office made "insightful" comments and noted his background was in soil and water conservation. According to Ball, EPA officials were making the argument that the proposed lake would be damaging down stream for water quality.

Although Florida officials were invited to attend the meeting by EPA and they also voiced water quality concerns, Ball noted that the Florida agencies had no jurisdiction in the matter and the decision is, ultimately, the Corps' to make. However, Ball did note that Georgia EPA must issue a 401-C Clean Water Permit before the Corps can approve a Section 404 Permit for the construction of a 960-acre recreational lake.

Ball said questions were raised concerning the ability of the county to properly manage a lake of this size and the reason for the project. The county commission chairman described those concerns as "excuses."

"We have preliminary plans in place to deal with the cost of building and managing the lake, but we are not going to put the cart before the horse," Ball repeated what he expressed to the EPA officials. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials in Savannah met with EPA personnel Tuesday to address issues discussed here Friday and the Corps will make a decision whether or not to issue a permit.

Chairman Ball predicted a permit will be issued, but that it will be a provisional permit and will include stipulations the county must address before being allowed to construct the lake.

County Attorney Kevin S. Cauley questioned whether Corps officials used the term provisional or conditional and pointed out that it is his understanding that all Section 404 permits are issued with conditions.

County Administrator Rusty Moyer predicted a management plan for the lake could likely be a condition of a permit, if one is issued. Moyer believes officials are having difficulty approving the permit for the fishing/recreational lake because no such permit for a lake of this size has been issued since 1969.

Moyer also noted that EPA had failed to make comment on the application when the joint public notice on the project was issued back in 2006. Ball says that EPA officials said last week they were not aware of any developments on the application since 2006 until recently.

Overall, Ball concluded that the meeting was a positive step and everyone better understood the process and what has been happening with the permit application. "Is everyone satisfied? No! but we all better understand the process," Chairman Ball said.

Following the meeting Friday, officials, including Congressman Bishop, toured the proposed lake site.

County officials now await word from the Corps with a final decision on the county's application. Go to [www.cairomessenger](http://www.cairomessenger.com) . com for updates on the lake project as developments take place.